Music as post-traumatic discourse:

Nikolay Myaskovsky's Sixth Symphony

Abstract

This essay explores ways in which musicologists might extend work undertaken by humanities scholars in the interdisciplinary field of trauma studies that has highlighted the centrality of traumatic experience to modernist creativity. It is focussed around a case study of a musical composition that represents the emotional aftermath of a traumatic event, the Sixth Symphony of the Soviet composer Nikolay Myaskovsky (1923). A central concern is to demonstrate how the symphony's musical symbolism is strikingly evocative of typical features of post-traumatic mentation, such as dissociation and emotional numbing, and the inhibition of the ability to mourn. It closes by considering the potential implications of the findings for understanding work by other modernist composers.

Trauma and artistic modernism

The significance of personal and collective traumata in shaping artistic modernism is now widely acknowledged: insofar as art has always been a locus for reflection on fundamental existential questions, it is scarcely surprising that the art of the last century engaged so extensively with experiences of upheaval, destruction, and violence that were unprecedented in scale and in their effects. The stylistic and formal features of many

modernist artworks reflect a struggle to make sense of the seemingly senselessness and to bear witness to unimaginable suffering. Readings of modernist literature and visual artworks as modalities of post-traumatic discourse have multiplied considerably in recent years. Trauma has also long been understood as centrally relevant to important developments within musical modernism (this understanding is implicit throughout Theodor Adorno's influential writings on twentieth-century music and his analysis of the predicaments facing composers of contemporary classical music after Auschwitz, for example), but musicologists have yet to explore this question more systematically. Attempts to consider musical representations of post-traumatic subjectivity from theoretical or technical perspectives have also been few in number.[1]

A comprehensive treatment of these complex topics is beyond the scope of the present essay, which has the more modest objective of reflecting on how musicology might derive intellectual stimulus from work undertaken in trauma studies across the humanities and contribute to a richer understanding of artistic modernism. The discussion is focussed around a case study of a musical composition that evokes a traumatic event and its aftermath in a particularly striking fashion—the Sixth Symphony of the Russian composer Nikolay Myaskovsky, which was completed in 1923 and conceived as a commemoration of those who perished during the Russian Revolution and the ensuing Civil War. A central concern is to illustrate how music can furnish symbolic analogues to characteristic phenomena of post-traumatic mentation, such as the ego defences of dissociation and psychic numbing, which prevent overwhelmingly distressing emotions, thoughts, and

[1] Amongst the most notable recent contributions to this literature has been Maria Cizmic's *Performing Pain: Music and Trauma in Eastern Europe* (2011), which examines the engagement of notable Eastern European composers who came to prominence in the 1960s with themes related to pain, suffering, and collective injury.

somatic sensations from being admitted to consciousness, as well as the processes of mourning that are an indispensible preliminary to transcendence of the traumatised state. In formulating the ideas, I have intentionally eschewed the highly specialised terminology and methodologies employed by musicologists in technical analyses of musical works and attempted to describe the musical processes in terms that will be readily comprehensible to the non-specialist reader in the hope of facilitating interdisciplinary dialogue.

Composing the Revolution

Nikolay Myaskovsky (1881-1950) was one of the foremost Russian composers of his generation and a central figure in Soviet musical life. His Sixth Symphony is a composition of notable importance in the history of Russian music: it is not only an outstanding achievement, but was amongst the first major Soviet artworks to treat the subject of the 1917 Revolution. A monumental fresco lasting over an hour in performance, it made an overwhelming impression on the occasion of its premiere in Moscow in 1924. Many members of the audience openly wept: there was a powerful sense that the score encapsulated something fundamental about their shared experiences of the preceding years. Although little is known about Myaskovsky's personal responses to events, on the basis of this score alone they can safely be inferred to have been profoundly ambivalent. There is none of the dutiful celebration of the October Revolution that would subsequently become *de rigueur* for Soviet artists: the emphasis throughout is on its tragic aspects. As a result, the symphony attracted much hostile commentary and was scarcely performed for several decades subsequently. Interestingly, when discussing the work in later life with his Soviet biographer, the only memory of the Revolution that Myaskovsky specifically recalled

was of hearing the Bolshevik leader Nikolay Krïlenko deliver an incendiary public speech in Petrograd that concluded with the words 'Death, death, death to the enemies of the Revolution!', which he described as making an 'indelible impression' (Ikonnikov, 1982: 109). It is not difficult to understand why: Myaskovsky's own father, a military engineer, was beaten to death by a mob that mistook him for a White Army general—a fact that the composer prudently kept a closely-guarded secret (Dolinskaya, 2006: 46). Two other events provided significant imaginative stimulus. The first was hearing the Russian painter Boris Lopatinsky give a rousing rendition in a friend's home of two songs closely associated with the French Revolution, *Ça ira* and *La carmagnole*, in versions that Lopatinsky had heard sung in working-class districts of Paris. The second was a re-reading of the Belgian symbolist poet Émile Verhaeren's play *Les aubes* [The dawns] (1898), a dramatic portrayal of a idealised revolutionary hero who meets a martyr's death during an revolutionary uprising, which prompted the idea of incorporating these melodies in the symphony's finale (Myaskovskiy, 1964: 16–17). From its inception, therefore, the symphony was conceived as a meditation on personal and collective experiences of destruction and calamitous loss, its musical imagery laden with associations to revolutionary strife and violent death.

These associations notwithstanding, a musical work is unable to treat such subject matter as explicitly as a painting or a novel on account of the non-conceptual and non-discursive character of musical symbolism. Whatever it is that music conveys (a highly contentious topic throughout the history of aesthetics), it resists formulation in verbal terms: it is impossible to describe what a piece of music is 'about', as one can summarise the action of a play or the subject matter of a poem (even if no summary could ever capture the total import of the original). Moreover, music is patently incapable of representing external reality as concretely as words and visual images can: a sequence of pitches cannot

communicate the details of an object's physical appearance, for example. On the other hand, what music can evoke with remarkable vividness is a succession of emotional states unfolding in time, and the long-range accumulation of tension and its release.

In Myaskovsky's Sixth Symphony, the musical symbolism is suggestive of a protracted struggle to overcome a psychically fractured post-traumatic state and integrate split-off affects, culminating in a cathartic outpouring of grief. Before proceeding to discuss the nature of this symbolism in more detail, it will first be necessary to explain why Myaskovsky chose the genre of the symphony to explore experiences of this nature.

The symphony as psychological drama

By the closing decades of the nineteenth century, the symphony was generally regarded as a vehicle for music of weighty import, comparable to the epic genres in literature or the imposing historical paintings of the nineteenth century. In comparison to solo instrumental and chamber music genres, which suggested communications of a more private and intimate nature, the use of massed orchestral forces inescapably lent it the character of a large-scale public utterance: by the turn of the twentieth century, it was not uncommon for symphonies to assume monumental proportions, generally comprising three or four movements (principal consistent sections) of contrasting tempo and character with a combined duration of an hour or more. This approach to the genre was profoundly influenced by the symphonies of Beethoven, especially his Third, Fifth, and Ninth—imposing dramas in sound dominated by the striving to achieve a long-range *telos*, typically a decisive culmination and resolution of the preceding tensions. The *locus classicus* of this model is Beethoven's Fifth, in which the turbulent conflicts of the first movement are ultimately

dispelled in the exhilarating jubilation of the finale's closing pages, moving from a sombre C minor to a radiant C major. This conceptualisation of the symphony owes much to the theatre. Just a dramatist generates tension and suspense from the interaction of characters whose desires and intentions come into conflict, the symphonist creates analogous tensions from the alternation and interplay of musical material evoking contrasting emotional states. The more pronounced the contrasts, the more fierce the resultant tensions—and, in consequence, the more complex the task of integration and resolution. The epic scale of many post-Beethovenian symphonies arises necessarily from the intensity and intricacy of their musical argument.

Composers of symphonies had another powerful resource in their dramatic armoury—their handling of tonality, the system of major and minor keys on which Western art music had been based since the late Renaissance period. Until the early twentieth-century, when some composers began to abandon this system, pieces of music were generally structured around extended departures from and subsequent returns to a home key (the 'tonic'), in which they commenced and ended. Multi-movement works such as the symphony were unified tonally by having the last movement in the same key as the first, though at least one of the inner movements would be in another key for the sake of variety.[2] (Symphonies commencing in a minor key not uncommonly ended in the corresponding major key—the concluding C major of Beethoven's Fifth is sufficiently close to the opening C minor as to be perceived as 'home', though a transformed version of it.)

[2] By the end of the nineteenth century, notable symphonists such as Gustav Mahler and Carl Nielsen were experimenting with forms of goal-orientated organisation based on the principle of 'progressive tonality', in which the tonal drama centred on the ultimate attainment of a different key than the one in which the symphony opened.

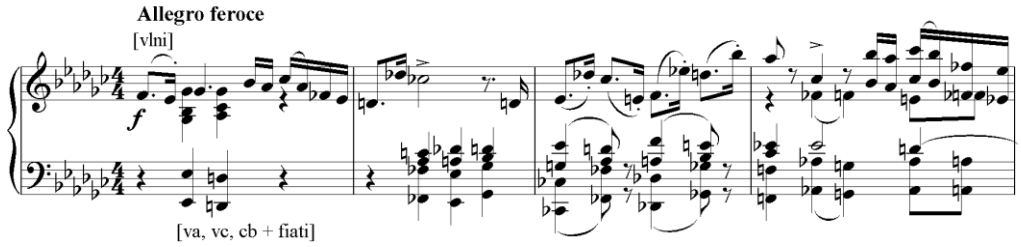
The excursions to different keys within an individual movement ('modulations') provided necessary contrast and, indeed, were often dramatised by the presentation on arrival of new musical ideas of a disparate character. Modulations are effected by introducing and substituting pitches alien to the seven-note scale that forms the basis of the main key. Within the conventions of the Western tonal system, these are understood to disturb the tonal equilibrium. If the scale of new key has a large proportion of its constituent pitches in common with the home key, the sense of departure from the state of equilibrium is not so pronounced; whereas if the proportion is higher, the departure is more dramatic and generates greater tension. In all cases, this tension had to be resolved by an eventual emphatic reversion to the main key towards the close of the piece—a crucial juncture in the composition which generally conveyed a sense of a decisive outcome at least, if not a complete resolution of the foregoing tensions.

In the music of a skilful and imaginative composer, the treatment of tonality and musical material interact in highly subtle ways. A musical idea can acquire a radically altered character when restated in different keys, on different instruments, and in different textures or tempi, while remaining recognisably the same contours and rhythmic organisation. A statement of a musical idea in a rapid tempo and strident timbres in a swift succession of remotely related keys may communicate conflict and instability, whereas a protracted majestic restatement in a stately tempo of the same idea in the home key at the close of the composition could convey a sense of having prevailed over adversity and transcendence of conflicts. In this way, musical symbolism can be richly evocative of the flux of psychic life, mirroring the transformations over time of our emotional responses to situations and events. In particular, the symbolism of dramatic disruptions to the stability of a home key and its eventual definitive restoration and stabilisation, intrinsic to post-Beethovenian

symphonism, suggests an analogy with the struggle of the ego to master conflicts and maintain equilibrium in the face of distressing or frustrating events. The ultimate return to the tonic key betokens the achievement of psychic integration and containment of the forces that threaten it.

In composing his Sixth Symphony, Myaskovsky took this teleological model as his starting point. Like other notable symphonies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, its four movements are linked by recurrent musical ideas that are subjected to ongoing elaboration and development. Its dramaturgical trajectory recalls Beethoven's Fifth in that it commences in the tonic minor key—here, E-flat minor—and ultimately achieves E-flat major after a protracted struggle. However, Myaskovsky realises this basic scheme in a decidedly novel way by means of his handling of tonal and thematic processes.

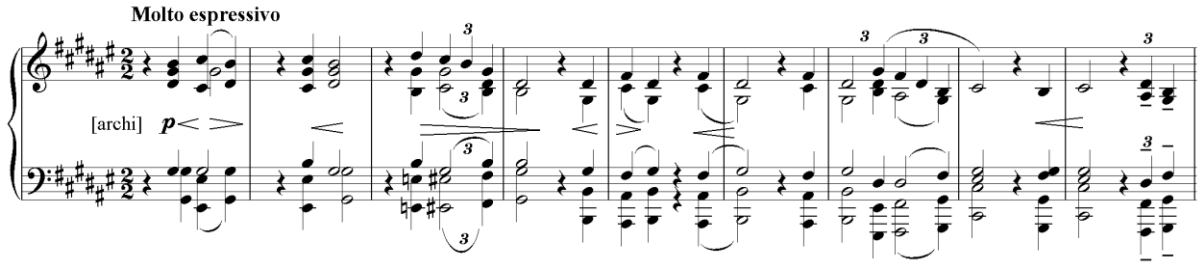
The symphony's argument unfolds as a fiercely conflicted dialectical engagement between two violently contrasted categories of musical material, both of which are introduced in the opening phases of the first movement. The first category is exemplified by the impetuous, dissonantly harmonised theme presented at the opening of the first movement, characterised by vaulting, angular leaps and agitated rhythmic patterns (Ex. 1).



Ex. 1: Symphony No. 6, principal theme of first movement

Although it is ostensibly stated in the 'home' key of E-flat minor, the stability of this tonality is highly precarious, as the theme ventures rapidly from key to key. Indeed, E-flat minor is

never fully stabilised at any point in the movement and one's sense of it as a holding centre remains tenuous throughout—a feature that, as we shall see, proves central to the symphony's design. The second main musical idea is very different: a solemn theme stated quietly on stringed instruments, whose lyricism and calmer rhythmic character provide relief from the prevailing mood of *Sturm und Drang* (Ex. 2). Moreover, it stabilises a key, albeit

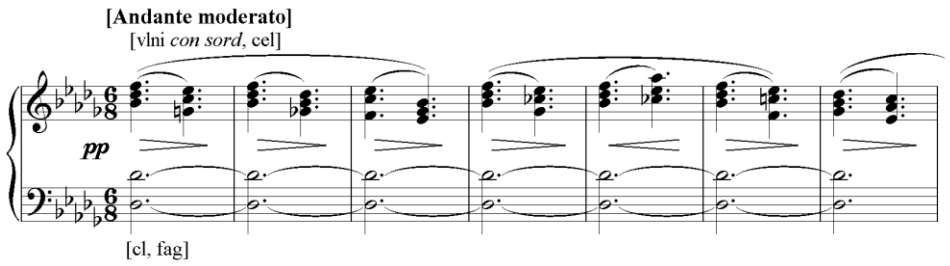


Ex. 2: Symphony No. 6, subsidiary modal theme of first movement

fleetingly—a modal G-sharp minor, which lends it a distinctive character recalling the archaic scales employed in folk song and liturgical chant, a feature that also assumes greater significance as the symphony proceeds. The respite proves to be short-lived, and the music soon resumes its restless course. When the lyrical modal idea recurs after an intervening episode, the dissonant harmonies associated with the first theme encroach on it, robbing it of its stability and poise. Its subsequent treatment is striking: throughout the central phase of the first movement, it attempts repeatedly to assert itself and to establish a stable key, but its unfolding is cut short every time by material associated with the dissonant first theme, which assumes increasingly menacing and disruptive forms. This passage eventuates in a climax of extreme violence, which heralds a full restatement of the first theme. Thereafter, the modal idea fails to reassert itself, and is eventually presented in a transformed guise evocative of a funeral march, bringing the movement to a sombre close.

The music returns to the ostensible home key of E-flat minor, but its stability is always in doubt: the prevailing mood is one of an uneasy truce.

The conflicts re-erupt in the second movement, which also juxtaposes sharply contrasted ideas. The first section is once again dissonant and tonally unstable, exuding a sinister, manic energy. It subsides abruptly, leading to a slower central section. The modal sound-world reappears, and with it, stability of key—this time introducing a melody based on a mediaeval plainchant setting of the *Dies irae* sequence from the Latin Requiem Mass (Ex. 3), whose Latin text vividly evokes the Last Judgement and the Christian's dread of



Ex. 3: Symphony No. 6, melody based on *Dies irae plainchant*

eternal damnation. The melody had become widely familiar through being quoted in notable works by Berlioz, Liszt, and other nineteenth-century composers, and had acquired strong associations with ideas of death, calamity, and mourning. There can be no doubt that Myaskovsky consciously intended these here. By quoting this chant, he establishes a connection between the attainment of a stable key and the act of mourning. But as yet mourning remains only a possibility, an abstract idea: the chant is intoned softly against ethereal orchestral sonorities, as though heard in the far distance. It has an unreal, hallucinatory quality, rather than being a passionate outpouring of grief. The *Dies irae* is brusquely swept aside by a reprise of the music heard at the opening, which rises to a fresh

pitch of delirium; and after a final frenzied onslaught, the movement ceases abruptly, its tensions unresolved.

Musical representations of post-traumatic mentation

This juncture in the symphony, half-way through its course, is a good place to pause to reflect on the significance of what has transpired so far. Three features of the musical symbolism are especially striking in suggesting analogues to common phenomena of post-traumatic mentation. The first is the symphony's apparent inability to define its 'home key' or to stabilise any key—even if the central passage of the second movement manages to do so for a longer time than had been possible previously. Much of the music has a turbulent character, flaring up swiftly and unpredictably in violent climaxes. Its mood is predominantly strained and oppressive, and moments of genuine repose are conspicuously absent. It does not seem far-fetched to suggest that Myaskovsky's imagery here aptly evokes the hyperarousal commonly experienced by the victims of traumatic events that are so severe as to shatter their sense of ontological security. Their minds and bodies perceive the world as fraught with danger and remain in a state of hypervigilant alertness in anticipation of new extreme threats, even if there is little realistic basis for believing that they will arise. Minor, seemingly insignificant stimuli can trigger intense negative emotions of anxiety, anger, and fear, and prompt patterns of avoidant behaviour that are wholly disproportionate to their ostensible cause. This state of tension tends to become normalised, severely impairing sleep and concentration (van der Kolk *et al.*, 2007: 13–14). The ego appears incapable of mastering the inner turmoil—metaphorically, it remains in a state of unresolved dissonance,

unable to achieve the stability of a 'home key' into which all the tensions can be contained and resolved.

The second notable feature is the violent polarisation of the symphony's musical material, to the point of seemingly irreconcilable incompatibility. This furnishes a striking parallel to another feature of post-traumatic mentation—the prevalence of the powerful defence mechanism of dissociation. Confronted with an overwhelming experience that it is unable to assimilate, the ego responds by fragmenting, preventing elements of consciousness from integrating that are normally unified. Memories of the traumatic event may be divorced from the powerful emotions that should accompany them, for example, or repressed to a greater or lesser extent. Instead of anger and distress, victims of trauma typically report persistent emotional unresponsiveness and mental blankness co-existing with hyperarousal, and the feeling that the traumatic event were somehow unreal (van der Kolk, 1995; Nijenhuis *et al.*, 2004). This mechanism allows life to go on, but at the expense of normal emotional functioning. As Donald Kalsched points out, dissociation is by no means a 'passive, benign process', but appears to involve 'an active attack on one part of the psyche by other parts … as though the normally integrative tendencies in the psyche must be interrupted by force'. Characteristically, as soon as memories or emotions associated with the traumatic event emerge into consciousness, they trigger overwhelming anxiety and reinforce the dissociative defences, fragmenting the victims' affective experience in order to shield them from unbearable pain. Paradoxically, these defences traumatise 'the inner object world to prevent re-traumatisation in the outer one' (Kalsched, 1996: 13-16). Thus, the mind appears divided against itself—at once attempting to integrate the traumatic experience into awareness, and at the same time, resisting such awareness. This state of inner division and such mental processes are aptly symbolised by the character of the Sixth

Symphony's musical material and by its treatment. As we have seen, the dissonant category of musical material encroaches aggressively on the modal material every time it seeks to assert itself, and both movements have so far failed to achieve a synthesis.

Over the course of the two movements, Myaskovsky has established an association between the establishment of tonal stability and thoughts of death, catastrophe, and mourning—though what is to be mourned is as yet uncertain, just as inchoate thoughts, feelings, and memories connected with a traumatic event surface fleetingly but are not integrated into a coherent narrative of self. It is noteworthy, however, that the presentation of the musical material based on the *Dies irae* has an incorporeal quality, emphasised by its glacial, high-pitched sonorities which suggest a disconnection from lived experience in the present. This quality links with a third important characteristic of the post-traumatic state—a pervasive emotional numbness (van der Kolk and Saporta, 1991). It is only when the ego becomes sufficiently strong to withstand the intensity of the split-off negative emotions without dissociating that the work of integration and healing can begin—a process symbolised in the symphony's remaining two movements.

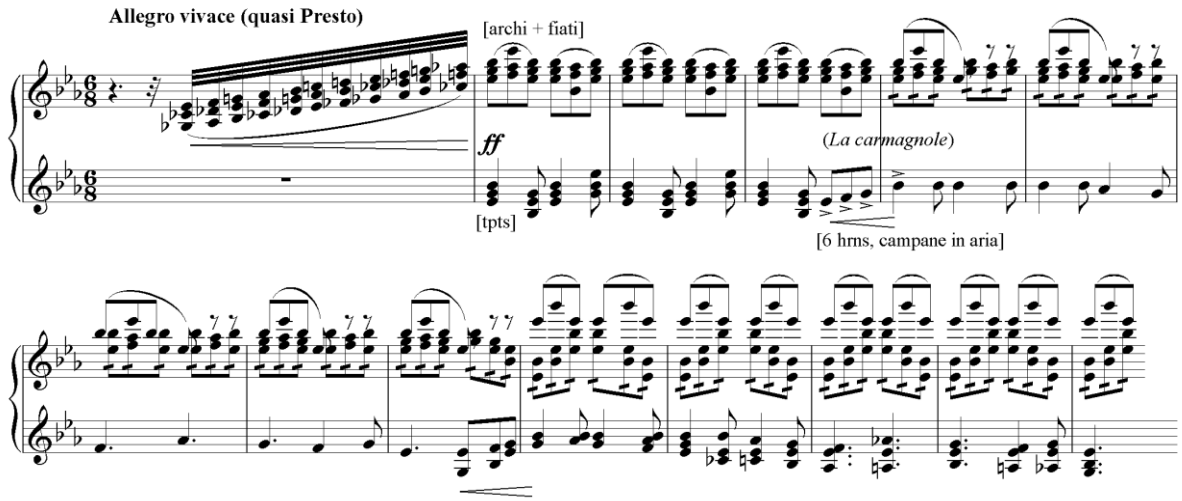
Mourning the Revolution

In multi-movement symphonies, one of the inner movements will be in a slow tempo, providing contrast to the surrounding faster-paced movements. In the post-Beethovenian symphony, it tended to constitute the work's emotional centre of gravity and was often of a serious, meditative nature, somewhat after the manner of a lengthy soliloquy in a drama in which one of the principal characters reflects on the foregoing events. The slow movement of Myaskovsky's Sixth follows this schema, but contributes significantly to

the work's dramatic argument. Like the preceding movements, its brooding opening sections fail to establish a stable key, but significantly, one gradually consolidates as it unfolds—the key of B major, which stands in quite a close relationship to E-flat minor, the ostensible 'home key' of the entire symphony. In this tonal region, Myaskovsky introduces a significant new idea—a long-breathed theme of poignant beauty, which is restated several times before the movement's close and eventually prevails after intervening episodes of a darker and more conflicted character. Its warmth and lyricism contrast strikingly with the violence and extremity that have predominated heretofore, suggesting a reawakening of feeling after a benumbed state. Significantly, it prompts a reappearance of the *Dies irae* material from the second movement, which on this occasion, is not peremptorily banished, but allowed to remain present, although its sonorities remain cold and distant as before. The slow movement ends in a mood of serene calm in B major—a noteworthy achievement in the context of preceding events, even if the symphony's conflicts have yet to be fully mastered. This task must consequently be accomplished by the finale.

After the deeply poetic conclusion of the slow movement, the opening of the finale is completely unexpected—brash statements of the two French Revolutionary songs that Myaskovsky noted down from Lopatinsky, starting with a *fortissimo* presentation of *La carmagnole* blared out on six French horns in unison against an orchestral texture evocative of a military band (Ex. 4). The effect is jarring and strikes an incongruous note of banality. This is by no means a miscalculation on Myaskovsky's part, however: his likely intentions clarify if one considers his reasons for quoting this material in the first place. The obvious question arises why he chose to use songs associated with the French Revolution rather than the Russian Revolution, such as the funeral march *Vï zhertvoyu pali* [You fell victim] or the rousing *Smelo, tovarishchi, v nogu* [Boldly, comrades, in step]—for which he was much

criticised by later Soviet commentators.[3] One possible explanation may be that the French Revolution was the archetype of all modern revolutions and Myaskovsky wished to emphasise the universality of the experience of conflict and suffering caused by such events. But a more likely reason suggests itself—the associations prompted by the songs' texts and their general musical character.



Ex. 4: Symphony No. 6, statement of *La carmagnole* at opening of finale

Both songs present a highly simplistic view of revolutionary violence, especially the widely popular demotic variants that entered French folklore.[4] The *sans culottes* version of *Ça ira*, which may well have been the one that Lopatinsky heard sung in working class

[3] A representative example: 'It is noteworthy that the finale dealing with the revolutionary theme contains no Russian melody, with the exception of the chant, and that the Russian people fighting for the revolution are symbolized conventionally, in accordance with an abstract "bookish" tradition, by melodies of songs associated with the French Revolution.' (Polyakova, n.d.: 42–43)

[4] The history of both songs is complex and they exist in numerous variants: see Pierre, 1904: 477–493 and 554–560; and Mason, 1996: 42–46.

districts of Paris, details with relish how the aristocracy will be strung up from the city's lampposts:

Ah! ça ira, ça ira, ça ira,	Ah! it'll be fine, it'll be fine, it'll be fine,
les aristocrates à la lanterne!	The aristocrats to the lamp-post!
Ah! ça ira, ça ira, ça ira,	Ah! it'll be fine, it'll be fine, it'll be fine,
les aristocrates on les pendra!	The aristocrats, we'll hang them!
Si on n' les pend pas	If we don't hang them,
on les rompra,	We'll break them,
si on n' les rompt pas	If we don't break them,
On les brûlera.	We'll burn them.

Similarly, *La carmagnole* gloatingly describes the humiliations visited on Marie Antoinette and her supporters, and is reputed to have regularly accompanied dancing around the guillotine (a scene memorably evoked in Käthe Kollwitz's etching of the same title). Whichever versions of these songs Myaskovsky heard, he can have been in no doubt of their sinister import. As Constant Pierre, a leading French authority on this repertory, observed in his *Hymnes et chansons de la Révolution* (1904), both songs have long had a dubious reputation on account of 'the abuses to which they were subject in many tragic circumstances':

> Like the *Ça ira*, *La carmagnole* is fraught with memories of the excesses committed while it was sung and danced, as well as the violent words which have sometimes been associated with the music. The melody has been identified with them and the actions that they prompted. It consequently acquired a political and revolutionary character and evokes associations with wild public disorder and murder. (Pierre, 1904: 554, 557)

Neither of the song texts acknowledges the suffering that the Revolution has caused, and both are set to trite, mindlessly jolly tunes that are startlingly at variance with their sanguinary sentiments: they suggest a state of consciousness that is profoundly dissociated from the consequences of violence. And as their subsequent treatment reveals, it is precisely such a view of revolutionary violence that the Sixth Symphony emphatically repudiates.

Crucially, the initial statement of *La carmagnole* is presented in E-flat major, the major variant of the 'home key' of E-flat—as though confidently asserting that the preceding conflicts have been overcome. However, in the context of the music that has preceded it, the celebratory mood strikes the listener as forced and hollow—it has an artificial, whipped-up quality, which calls to mind another typical post-traumatic response, the so-called 'manic defence' first theorised by Melanie Klein (Klein, 1935, 1940), which is mobilised to deny feelings of depression, anxiety, and guilt, and to evade the mourning of loss (Winnicott, 1975). This opening phase of the finale attempts to impose E-flat major by fiat, as it were, and force a factitious, premature transcendence of the fierce tensions that have dominated the symphony. However, the dissonant musical material presented in the first movement intervenes, undermining the stability of E-flat major and renewing the conflict. The symbolic import of this passage is unmistakable, and after rising to a strained climax, the music subsides in a mood of exhaustion, leading to a restatement of the modal *Dies irae* melody, now in heard more sombre and 'embodied' sonorities. An ominous reminder of death re-intrudes, stubbornly refusing to be banished. After a brief transition, we hear a new modal idea intoned softly on the clarinet—the melody of a traditional Russian chant entitled *Razstavaniye* [sic.] *dushi s telom* [The parting of the soul from the body], which Myaskovsky

came across in a volume of folksongs from the Voronezh district collected by the eminent contemporary ethnographer Mitrofan Pyatnitsky (Pyatnitskiy et al, 1914). The semantic association of the modal sound-world with mourning is further strengthened.

At this point, the French Revolutionary songs attempt to reassert themselves in E-flat major, breaking in abruptly on the reflective mood. Once again, however, dissonant harmonies encroach on them, and they are rejected with even greater vehemence, never to return. Conflict now erupts in full force, leading to a reprise of some of the most strenuous passages heard in the first movement. At the apex of a climax of unprecedented violence, the music moves emphatically to E-flat minor, securely establishing the symphony's home key for the first time. Myaskovsky dramatises this arresting moment by introducing a new sonority that he has held in reserve for almost an hour—a choir, which enters with piercing wordless cries of anguish. It is a superbly calculated dramatic stroke and deeply moving in its effect, suggestive of a collective outpouring of long-suppressed grief. As the climax abates, the choir starts to sing the modal Russian chant which had previously been heard in another key, but is now heard in the home key—an event that has been in preparation since the first movement, and which constitutes the symphony's psychological *telos*. The text of the chant, which is now heard for the first time, makes explicit the link between the act of mourning and the symbolism of the modal musical material's struggle to stabilise its fundamental tonality:

Что мы видели?	What have we seen?
Диву дивыную,	Marvel of marvels
Диву дивную,	Marvel of marvels,
Телу мёртвую.	A dead body.
Как душа-та с телом	How that soul

Расставалася,	Parted from the body,
Да прощалася.	Yea, bade it farewell.
Как тебе-та, душа,	You, soul, to go
На суд Божий идить	To God's judgement;
А тебе-та, тело,	And you, body,
Во сыру мать землю.[5]	To the damp mother earth.

In context, Myaskovsky's choice of this chant was deeply apt and richly suggestive in meaning. First, the text's allusion to the act of witnessing a dead body acknowledges the suffering and destruction wrought by the Revolution—a subject that was consistently downplayed, if not expunged altogether from official Soviet narratives of events. To witness in this way is also to bear witness, and to admit to consciousness the reality of what has transpired, rather than denying it—as the French Revolutionary songs attempt to do. Implicitly, the finale's 'rejection' of the spurious resolution that these songs seek to enforce is also a rejection of official Soviet views of the Revolution. This act of *Anerkennung* makes it possible to grieve for what has transpired and to transcend the riven, traumatised state of consciousness. It is particularly fitting that this move towards healing is signalled by the introduction into the orchestral sonority of human voices singing a Russian text—symbolically giving a voice to the victims and embodying the collective grief of the survivors in a way that the disembodied sonorities of the Latin *Dies irae* plainchant do not. Moreover, the fact that the Russian chant is a traditional folk melody lends this act of communal mourning greater immediacy than the impersonal Latin chant, and the introduction of the

[5] Apart from making emendations to comply with the 1917 spelling reforms, Myaskovsky otherwise retained the non-standard orthographical and grammatical features of the chant text as reproduced in Pyatnitskiy, 1914.

vernacular reinforces the sense that an emotional realisation has 'struck home' in every sense.

This culmination of the symphony is as moving as it is unexpected, without a hint of sentimentality or exaggerated pathos. It signals a definitive resolution of the symphony's central conflict, and the dissonant musical material makes no further appearance. After the choir finishes singing the chant, the music turns from E-flat minor to E-flat major, in which key Myaskovsky reprises the lyrical B major melody from the slow movement. The symphony's closing pages furnish a serene epilogue to this epic symphonic drama, intimating acceptance of loss and the return of hope.

Conclusion

The Sixth Symphony is an exceptional artistic achievement and reveals Myaskovsky's full stature as a powerful and original musical thinker. In some respects, such as its introduction of voices into the symphony and its allusion to contemporary events, it remained an isolated experiment in his output, never to be repeated. In other respects, however, it represented a summation of tendencies that had long been in evidence, especially in its exploration of an embattled subjectivity and of a profoundly tragic sense of life. More than perhaps any other of his works, it eloquently evokes the struggle to affirm existence despite anguished awareness of the 'fragile ordinance of the world' (*die gebrechliche Einrichtung der Welt*, in Heinrich von Kleist's memorable phrase).

It is also a score that illustrates vividly the importance of traumatic experience in prompting certain manifestations of modernist musical creativity and the ways in which it can shape compositions' musical symbolism. Both topics merit more extensive investigation

by musicologists, who could fruitfully extend into their own discipline research undertaken by humanities scholars working in other domains of trauma studies. As Myaskovsky's symphony shows, the nature of musical symbolism makes it particularly well-suited to representing the phenomenology of the traumatised state as well as the struggle to transcend it. The score communicates with a powerful immediacy even to listeners who are unaware of the technical means employed, if they are sufficiently receptive to the emotional experiences that it enacts. Arguably, this immediacy is all the greater because the experience is mediated through notes rather than words, without the distraction of concepts. It is important to emphasise that Myaskovsky did not compose the symphony according to a pre-existing abstract conceptual scheme, having decided that he was going to write a work evoking traumatic experience: the ideas seem to have occurred to him quite spontaneously during the compositional process, in his quest to discover the expressive potential of his musical material.[6]

The musical imagery suggestive of trauma and suffering used by Myaskovsky, though highly individual, evinces similarities to imagery used by notable modernist contemporaries—including Arnold Schoenberg and other composers of the Austro-German Expressionist movement, whose work is notable for its graphic depictions of extreme psychological states. All these composers were indebted to the work of Richard Wagner, notably passages in his operas *Tristan and Isolde* and *Parsifal* that depict violent emotional

[6] The gestation of the symphony was unusually protracted and Myaskovsky broke off its composition several times, being unsure how to proceed. The first draft was eventually completed in an intense burst of inspiration during the summer of 1922. To judge from his comments to friends, Myaskovsky himself was struck by the strangeness of its conception: see, for example, Myaskovsky to Boris Asaf'yev, 9 August 1922, quoted in (Lamm, 1989: 150)

disturbance; and from Wagner, the origins of this symbolism can be traced back through Romantic predecessors such as Chopin to music of even earlier periods—something that would constitute an absorbing historical study in itself. Such a study would raise a topic of central importance in the history of twentieth-century music: the cultural significance of the widespread abandonment of tonality after 1910 or so by composers of classical music, a repudiation that remains widespread up to the present day. As we have seen, the psychological drama of Myaskovsky's Sixth Symphony (and, indeed, of symphonies by other nineteenth- and early twentieth-century composers) hinges on the achievement of a stable key into which dissonant tensions can ultimately be resolved. If, as had been argued here, this process is a symbolic analogue to the ego's struggle to master and contain disruption, the rejection of tonality and the possibility of resolution suggest the persistent effects of a collective post-traumatic state. In a thought-provoking essay, the German composer and writer Wolfgang-Andreas Schultz has posed the question of the extent to which notable twentieth-century compositional idioms reflecting authentic experiences of trauma subsequently became normalised and their expressive force weakened (Schultz, 2005). These questions open up interesting avenues of exploration not only for the musicologist, but also for the cultural historian, in seeking to understand the relationship of important strands in twentieth-century composition to their wider cultural context.

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